

THE INDIAN COAL MINES.

Is Legislation necessary to regulate their
working?

A REVIEW OF A PAPER BY JOSEPH
CHATER, ESQ, F. S. S.

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*Certificated Colliery Manager,
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MR. CHATER is so discursive that it is difficult to answer him briefly and impossible without quoting at length from his pamphlet. I must therefore ask the indulgence of my readers at the outset, and would suggest that a reperusal of what Mr. Chater has written would help them to follow me.

I must first point out an error into which Mr. Chater has fallen. On pages 2—6 Mr. Chater labors very hard to shew that the low wages in England led to the various Mining Acts (he especially mentions that "In 1872"—the year of the last Mines Regulation Act—"the question of wages again came up"), and goes on to shew that "the Indian miner is well satisfied with his wages, which have advanced 50 per cent., &c."—the inference he intends us to draw being that no legislation is necessary here.

If—I confess to the doubt—these pages (2—6) have any meaning at all they shew that Mr. Chater thinks *the wages question was settled by the Mines Regulation Acts*. Such an idea is most erroneous and absurd. Mr. Chater, although he assumes to speak with authority, has apparently been misinformed as to the history of English mining legislation, and has not taken the trouble, or perhaps has not had the opportunity, to investigate the subject for himself. I would not think of accusing Mr. Chater of having read the Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1872, since a large portion of his pamphlet seems devoted to proving that he has not done so.

Since this century began—aye and long before—no Parliament would have passed a law to regulate wages in any industry.

No one now-a-days would support such an interference with the laws of supply and demand. No wonder Mr. Chater—laboring under an opposite belief—stands aghast ; since, if the legislature interfered to compel certain wages to be paid, it requires no great foresight to see that they could, on the same grounds, compel producers to sell at certain fixed prices.

Mr. Chater will allow me to reassure him on these points. If, as would certainly be the case, the Indian legislature drafted their Mining Act on the lines which English experience has shewn to be the best, there is no ground for Mr. Chater's too evident fears.

Mr. Chater's history of the progress of mining legislation in England and of the causes which led to the various enactments is mixed up with the establishment of Miners' Agents and Mutual Societies. It would be waste of time to attempt to unravel the tangled skein as the whole of it is foreign to the question at issue—the necessity for the inspection of Indian mines.

I cannot pass on without notifying my dissent from the contradictory and most illiberal views Mr. Chater gives expression to in referring to the rise of Miners' Agencies and the work done by them. After noticing the fact that less than a century ago miners in civilised England were in a "state of-slavery," and shewing (page 4) that the objects of Miner's Associations were the reduction of the long hours of labor and increase of wages." Mr. Chater gradually follows the history of these Associations until he comes to the year 1872. On page 6 he states his conviction that "the miners were perfectly right in their demands." These demands were made through their Associations and were on that account successful.

By the time, however, that Mr. Chater has got to page 16 he has forgotten this and—quoting "a writer 60 years ago" who "called upon the public and Parliament to limit and restrain these

Associations of Colliers"—adds, "there can be little doubt that if these views had been acted upon, *it would have been of benefit not only to the working colliers themselves but to the community generally!*" !!!

This is what Mr. Chater writes. If it is what he actually thinks then, I say, most assuredly he is not in sympathy with the working classes—in fact that his sympathies run in the direction of enslaving them. Surely then he has no right to speak for them when he argues that, from their point of view, legislation is unnecessary.

There is an amusing side to the question however. Mr. Chater is evidently suffering under nervous apprehension that he will, in the near future after the passing of the Act, have to meet the representative agent of his miners in the person of Ram Chunder Bowrie, who will not only demand a seat in Mr. Chater's office, while discussing the question whether the selling price of coal does not entitle him and his *confrères* to an increased rate for getting it, but will require that the discussion shall be carried on in Parliamentary language !!! Poor Mr. Chater ! such an outlook is enough to daunt him.

I fancy, however, that he will not find many who will share his fears. Indeed, the fact that the representation of the miners' interests in such a form as it has taken in England, can never be realized by natives in this country, will—in the minds of thoughtful people—be an additional reason why an Inspector—Inspectors in England, Mr. Chater teaches us, were the outcome of the agitation of miners' agencies—should be appointed.

Stated in brief Mr. Chater's remaining arguments against legislation seem to be—

1. The great difference in depth between Indian and English mines.

2. The non-success of the English Mining Acts.
3. The small quantity raised in this country not justifying the appointment of an Inspector.
4. The dearth of explosions and other accidents.
5. The bad state of trade here compared with the prosperous times when the last English Act came into force.
6. The impossibility of the total prevention of accidents.

We must examine these arguments in some detail.

First.—The great difference in depth between Indian and English mines.

This is a discovery entirely Mr. Chater's. In India he puts the maximum depth at 400 feet. The average depth in England is of course much greater, but Mr. Chater will find on enquiry that there are a great number of shafts of even less depth than this. Further—Mr. Chater will be surprised to learn—no one thought of making any distinction on such a ground in the Act of 1872, and the provisions of that Act apply equally to deep and shallow workings.

Mr. Chater forgets that a man wants fresh air whether he is in a room or a mine 400 feet or 400 yards deep; and that the roof, if unsafe in either case (room or mine) constitutes an equal danger to him.

In fact Mr. Chater's argument is a "shallow" one—if my readers will allow me to say so, and I may plead Mr. Chater's example. He certainly does not think a joke disfigures his style.

Secondly.—The non-success of the English Mining Acts.

It may count for something that the British Parliament, the German and French legislatures and the whole of the mining profession and of the working classes in England, are opposed in opinion to Mr. Chater.

It is also of interest to notice that Mr. Chater is—in different parts of his pamphlet—opposed to himself!

On pages 2 and 3 Mr. Chater enumerates the *evils which were remedied* by the various Mining Acts in England; but on page 14 he speaks of “the *unfavourable changes* that have been wrought in England by the Act, &c.”!!! At the top of page 15 Mr. Chater says:—“Its” (the Act’s) “*beneficial and simple* enactments will become incomprehensible, and if it does not retard the progress of the industry it will *do very little good.*” Here Mr. Chater admits that the Act is “beneficial and simple,” but is rather doubtful about its application to this country. He only remains in doubt, however, to the bottom of the same page, for he there states that “the English Mines Regulation Act 1872 * * * will appear over our heads like the sword of Damocles! Then all will be chaos and confusion.”!!!

Thirdly.—The small quantity raised in this country not justifying the appointment of an Inspector.

Mr. Chater attempts to shew this by figures. I do not dispute these particular figures, but must point out that Mr. Chater has himself shewn that he is wrong in his conclusion.

On page 12 we find that there are 12 Inspectors in England and 163 million tons of minerals raised. Mr. Chater asks, not unnaturally (for I can quite understand that Mr. Chater fancied he had made a strong point), “are such appointments really necessary in India where the out-put is barely the miserable quantity of two million tons—less than one-eightieth of the English raising.” In the succeeding paragraphs, however (pages 12 and 13), Mr. Chater conclusively shews that the Inspectors in England have such enormous districts, &c., that they are quite useless as Inspectors; and that “the term ‘Inspector’ is to all intents and purposes a misnomer.”

We have then Mr. Chater’s authority for it—that it would be absurd to take the English proportion of Inspectors to raisings as a precedent to guide us in India.

Mr. Chater does not, however, stop here, for he states his firm belief (page 13) that a single individual, if appointed in India, could not "do justice to all the workings in the country." Mr. Chater asks "can he stand the strain, physical as well as mental, * * * under the vicissitudes of a trying climate?"

On these grounds Mr. Chater comes to the most astounding conclusion that an Inspector is not required! It seems to me that Mr. Chater has made out a very good case not only for the appointment of an Inspector but of more than one.

Fourthly.—The dearth of explosions and other accidents.

Mr. Chater is wrong in stating that there have been no explosions in India. There have been several explosions, with fatal results in the field in the midst of which Mr. Chater lives. These explosions were the result of ignorance on the part of those in charge.

On page 5 Mr. Chater, in a burst of eloquence, informs us that "Had the condition of the miners been one of abject slavery"—a mild slavery! (ordinary slavery perhaps Mr. Chater would say) would not have been an "inducing factor" to use Mr. Chater's own expression—" * * * had there been gaseous mines * * *, had there been deaths from drowning or other causes, then, gentlemen" (says Mr. Chater), "and only then, it could be urged that special legislation is requisite and necessary." In short Mr. Chater declares for the policy of locking the stable door after the steed has been stolen.

Mr. Chater's views on the subject of ventilation are very original, and not a little amusing. I may as well refer to them here.

On page 10 (last three lines of first para.) he reluctantly says—"I admit, however, that for isolated workings" (*sic*) "of considerable magnitude ventilation is essential." Is the inference Mr. Chater intends us to draw that the mines he personally superintends are not of considerable magnitude? I fancy so. It follows therefore—

for we may safely conclude that Mr. Chater acts on the maxims he lays down in his pamphlet—that they are without ventilation!! I quote the following sentences from Mr. Chater in support of this contention. They will be found on page 10 of his pamphlet.

“ I must now invite your attention to our little ‘explosions’—it may be of temper and feelings—but I am glad to say, gentlemen, *not* of the mines! Such a thing is unknown in this country, and what is more, the condition of ventilation is such that the miner, to have a comfortable snooze or rest occasionally from his labor for the pipe of peace is known to make a big fire large enough to roast an ox on. There he sits, within a few inches of the blaze, enjoying the smoke of the fire as much as that of his pipe, being as much devoted to the one as to the other! In fact, gentlemen, *he has his existence in smoke*, and may be looked upon as a veritable smoked human “herring.” It helps to bring my risible organs into action—or as some would say, elicits a smile!—When I hear the ado made by the so-called advocates for the Mining Act or state intervention.”

Here we have the most extraordinary picture of the state of things prevailing in Mr. Chater’s mines. Men asleep in all directions, fires “large enough to roast an ox” blazing in the working places—not only rendering the atmosphere foul (let the reader imagine himself seated in a capacious chimney under such circumstances!!) but endangering the safety of the mine. Has Mr. Chater forgotten that the walls of his mines are composed of coal? Mr. Chater states that this sort of thing “brings his risible organs into action.” I should have thought that it would have a much more potent effect on his lungs.

To be serious, however,—and the subject is a serious one—I trust Mr. Chater will forgive me when I tell him that his ideas on the subject of ventilation would not find favor in the eyes of examiners for mine managers’ certificates in England.

Mr. Chater's pamphlet has one distinguishing merit ; and those who wish well to the mining industry in India, owe him on this account their grateful thanks for having produced it. I refer to the fact that these views of Mr. Chater on the subject of ventilation of mines constitute one of the best proofs that an Inspector—and education—are required.

Fifthly. The bad state of trade here compared with the prosperous times when the last English Act came into force.

Mr. Chater would lead his readers to think it was the prosperous times of 1872 which caused legislation to be attempted. This is quite erroneous. The legislation of that time was quite independent of any such influence.

Since it is in the last degree improbable that the cost of an Inspector will be charged to the coal owners—as it would be a deviation from English practice to do so ; and further seeing that, even if the cost (salary of Inspector and office establishment) were levied from coal owners, it would be so small a charge, we must look elsewhere to find a reason for Mr. Chater's dread of the expense to owners.

It is only to those who are carrying on their mines, with inadequate appliances and by unscientific methods that the Act need be feared on the score of increased cost. Surely Mr. Chater is not expecting the Act to work such a revolution in the systems in vogue at his mines !!

If the plans followed by a mine owner or manager are safe and wise, the appointment of a Government Mine Inspector can make no difference, and therefore cannot increase the cost. If they are unsafe and unwise does Mr. Chater mean to argue that they should continue to be followed at whatever risk to life because, forsooth, it would be an expense to an owner to alter them ? It is a waste of time to argue from such a premise.

I have already expressed my opinion that the English practice of State-paid Inspectors would be adopted as the best. There are great difficulties in the way of the adoption of any other plan. A tonnage rate or duty is, I fancy, the only feasible way in which the charge could be levied direct from owners. The difficulties of collecting from the numerous native owners; of ascertaining and verifying the quantities raised by them; and of dealing with a duty which would vary with the quantity annually raised, are certainly in the road of the adoption of this plan.

Sixthly. The impossibility of the total prevention of accidents.

On page 9 (last paragraph) Mr. Chater deprecates legislation on the ground that "Education may succeed in making a difference, but it is doubtful if it will altogether stop the recurrence of accidents. The seeking after such an unattainable desideratum may aptly be likened to the search after the proverbial philosopher's stone."

Mr. Chater would then stifle any attempt at lessening the number, because total prevention of accidents cannot be attained!!

"*Education may succeed in making a difference.*" If Mr. Chater will try it he will not speak in so uncertain a tone.

We will now leave Mr. Chater's reasons against the necessity for legislation and notice some other portions of his pamphlet.

On page 13 we gather that Mr. Chater thinks the keeping of "plans or surveys of mines and workings," and the recording of statistics of accidents and accidental deaths are the chief duties of an Inspector.

This is a very superficial view. Mr. Chater would find that—as regards accidents—an Inspector—a scientific professional man—

would have power to investigate the causes of accidents ; to apportion blame, even to prosecute an owner or manager ; and to insist on an alteration of plans or practices which led, or were likely to lead, to disaster. This would be very different from the system described by Mr. Chater (page 13). "Regarding statistics of accidents and accidental deaths : these have all along been, and are, reported to the local Police officer, *who could be instructed to keep a correct statement of them and their causes, subject to check by the Resident Magistrate*, and which could be published once a year or oftener in the *Government Gazette* for general information."

Mr. Chater has forgotten to point out in what way this record would help to prevent the recurrence of accidents.

I must here refer to the absurd statement made by Mr. Chater that he does "not think the proportion of deaths from roof falls will be more than one for every 600,000 tons raised" (page 10) this would mean only three to four deaths per annum !! Any of the district officers will tell Mr. Chater better than this. My own impression is that the death-rate from this cause is as high if not higher than in England.

I share Mr. Chater's regret (page 8) that the Government do not give fuller particulars on this and other matters connected with the coal industry in the Administration Reports.

In considering the necessity of an Inspector Mr. Chater has omitted to notice the existence of numerous collieries owned and managed entirely by natives. It is notorious that these places are greatly in need of reform.

Had Mr. Chater taken this point into consideration he might possibly have looked less unfavourably on the prospect of having an Inspector. These natives raise their coal at less cost than respectable firms can, because they do so with makeshift

and dangerous appliances, and are thus enabled to undersell the latter. Inspection would tend to bring every one more on a level. Mr. Chater's trade would thus benefit.

Mr. Chater refers to the question of inspection at Warora and Mohpani. These places would come under the jurisdiction of the Inspector of course. As, however, the operations at those places are carried on under the direction of certificated men the Inspector would be able to devote the greater part of his time to Bengal.

I submit that I have quoted enough from Mr. Chater's lucubrations to shew that he has anything but a thorough knowledge of his subject. Indeed I go further—but I do not expect Mr. Chater to agree with me—I think I have shewn that the anecdote with which Mr. Chater closes his pamphlet has been misapplied. That, in short, Mr. Chater's part in this controversy answers to that of Mr. Pitt's in that anecdote. Eloquent Mr. Chater certainly is !

One last quotation from Mr. Chater, and I have done with his pamphlet.

"The question is, do we require an Inspector? no—and why? Because there is very little to be done in the way of inspection, *and less as regards instruction.*" The italics are mine.

This admirably epitomises Mr. Chater's pamphlet, but I have written to little purpose, if those to whom I have addressed myself are satisfied that the question can be so settled.

